

MEETING SUMMARY

North Carolina National Park, Parkway and Forests Development Council

January 22, 2010

1:00 PM –3:00 PM

*NCDENR Western Office
Swannanoa, NC*

Council Members in Attendance: *Maxine Dalton, Chairperson
Eric Jenkins, Vice-Chairperson
Jonathon Douthit
Jason Love
Myrna Campbell
Nelda Holder*

Council Member(s) Absent: *Patsy Lovedahl*

Guests: *Bob Miller / Great Smoky Mountain National Park
Mary Noel / U.S. Forest Service
Greg Yates / NC Division of Forest Resources
Travis Ruff / NC Division of Forest Resources
Phil Francis/ Blue Ridge Parkway
Tom Jackson / NC Division of Parks & Recreation
Monika Mayr / Blue Ridge Parkway
Phyllis Styles / Blue Ridge Forever
Matt Jarvis / NC Arboretum
Judy Francis / NCDENR, Staff to the Council*

- I. Call to Order – Maxine Dalton called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM.
- II. Welcome and Introductions – Maxine noted that the previous meeting summary was approved electronically so that members could forward to interested parties in a timely manner. Attendees then briefly introduced themselves.
- III. Speaker from BRIDGE Program
Travis Ruff and Greg Yates from the NC Division of Forest Resources provided a presentation about the BRIDGE Young Offenders Forest Conservation Program. Maxine reminded everyone that the budget cuts may threaten the BRIDGE program so the Council may choose to advocate for its continuation. Travis has worked with the BRIDGE program since 1987. He said that many projects that BRIDGE has done provide much needed help to the partners in this meeting. The program is a partnership between the Division of Forest Resources and the Department of Corrections and is located in Morganton, though work crews typically cover 32 counties in the western region. There are 14 crews and up to 84

inmates in the program. Their work saves the state over \$19 million since the program began. The Department of Corrections contribution is salaries for their 7 staff members, but does not include operating costs. The Division of Forest Resources pays all operating costs, a total of approximately \$1 million (inc. DFR personnel costs). The program was started to undertake fire suppression and control burning. They train inmates to do these jobs – and that training is critical skill and one that is not commonly found here in NC. They also assist counties through emergency disaster relief during and after ice storms, hurricanes, floods, accidents, etc. They also are involved in treating for hemlock wooly adelgid, trail maintenance, landscaping, and other various environmental projects. They have logged over 2 million man-hours since 1987.

Phyllis Styles asked if crews ever work on land controlled by land trusts doing things such as controlled burns. Greg Yates replied by saying that DFR (not BRIDGE) does partner with The Nature Conservancy sometimes, but a fee is charged. He said that BRIDGE often works with state parks and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Benefits to the state include having a well-trained fire fighting force on call 24-hours per day, saving millions of dollars; inmates become tax-paying citizens, very low recidivism (7.3% vs. 37% rate for general prison population), and low operating cost. It costs \$22k per year for the state to incarcerate the inmate. Success stories include some ex-program participants are hired by DFR and others eventually work in forestry-related pursuits after they are released. Bob Miller asked if they ever work out of state. Travis replied that is a very limited option due to extradition policy. Jonathon Douthit asked about security issues and was told about the rigorous selection process and extensive supervised training.

- IV. Comments from the Chair & Discussion re: Support for the BRIDGE Program – Maxine asked how the Council could help. Greg Yates said he would like to see influence on legislators through letters of support and personal contacts. Maxine asked the Council members if they would like to support BRIDGE in this way. Eric Jenkins made motion to support through letters and personal contacts. Nelda Holder seconded the motion which was unanimously approved. A letter will be drafted and circulated for Council member comments before it is sent out.

V. Other Business

Dissemination of Agency Reports – Mary Noel from USFS provided a handout that outlined funding her agency will receive through the economic stimulus program which includes significant investment in projects in western NC.

Myrna Campbell said there were no calls from NC residents to Congressman Shuler's office re: complaints about the North Shore Road Settlement, but there were some from other states. Ryan Fitzpatrick is the staff member in Washington assigned to the project.

Bob Miller from Great Smoky Mountain National Park provided a handout and said that stimulus funding included \$77.5 million to spend – mostly for roads. Visitation was up over 5% in 2009, mostly attributed to the 75th anniversary, but the I-40 rockslide is impacting visitation now. Dolly Parton has been aggressive in fundraising and she gave approximately \$125K in donations from her CD sales. The GSMNP Association also sold 800K worth of anniversary merchandise. Jonathon Douthit mentioned that Swain County is pleased about improvement at the Deep Creek campground and the new Oconoluftee visitor center.

Phyllis Styles from Blue Ridge Forever said they continue to support LWCF projects. Acquisitions by land trusts in the region in 2009 total about 10,000 acres. About 40% of the land protected benefits public agencies. They are planning an event later in the fall to close their campaign.

Matt Jarvis from the NC Arboretum described how the holiday snow storm put out power at the facility for 4 days – they were closed for 5 days. There were lots of trees down, especially on entrance road. Visitation up from previous year, mostly from an increase in local visitors.

Tom Jackson from NC State Parks also described problems with snow and ice issues, Mt. Mitchell was closed for six days. In 2009 they had 16 million visitors – a record year. The annual economic impact of state parks in NC is over \$400 million and a study is available on their website. The new online reservation system is working well. Susan Bean is the new superintendent at Grandfather Mountain State Park. Lake James State Park Phase I development will open to the public soon. With the assistance of the BRIDGE program, they conducted a 500-acre controlled burn in Gaston County - the largest one they've ever had.

Phil Francis from the Blue Ridge Parkway said there were lots of weather related closures and trees down and they have requested \$1.5 million for storm impact work. The extent of the damage will present a challenge to open on time. They will receive around \$70 million in stimulus dollars – but it's not for regular operations and staff numbers are still down. Road damage / landslide hazard repairs are ongoing and there is hope that it will take only 1 year instead of the estimated 2. Anniversary events being planned include a symposium at Appalachian State University, 9/10-12 festival, stewardship and conservation education and outreach, and funding over time. Legislation will be introduced regarding funding for watershed protection, and allowing acquisitions. They want to create an entity to manage the Blue Ridge region to maintain values – to integrate and provide a forum to bring together various groups working on this issue. The General Management Plan is still in draft form. The Moses Cone estate plan is almost done. Climate change continues to be a concern and there are rumblings about wind farms and solar collectors adjacent to parkway which could impact views.

Judy Francis gave an update on Status of Mountain Resources Commission. An announcement should come soon about the Governor's appointees and a meeting date will be established then. The Council's website is under construction and should be on-line soon. It was determined that council members are not impacted by Executive Order No. 34 requiring ethics training, but because they are appointed by the Governor, will be required to adhere to the attendance requirements. This means that any member who does not attend at least 75% of meetings in a calendar year can be removed.

Maxine said that Bob McCollum sent her an email re: the council name change legislation. He has made a couple contacts with legislators and the issue seems to have support. He asked the Council for an official letter of request, and Judy and Maxine will prepare that.

Eric Jenkins mentioned there was a meeting recently to discuss creative options to get additional facilities at Lake James State Park. He will give an update on this issue at the next council meeting.

- VI. Next Meeting Date: April 30, 2010. Topic – BRP 75 Activities
- VII. Adjourn: There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 2:55 PM.